

NARRATIVE 9.

“WHO IS THAT GIRL I SEE?” NAVIGATING THE IDENTITIES OF STUDENT AND ADMINISTRATOR AS A GRADUATE WPA

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I'd like to become a WPA one day, so it made sense for me to pursue my writing program's graduate assistant director (GAD) position. When I applied for the opportunity, I didn't expect to get it because I was only a first-year Ph.D. student. I guess other people didn't expect it, either; some peers expressed their doubt in my abilities since previous GADs were more advanced students. These questions of my fitness foreshadowed ongoing difficulties I would encounter as a student administrator.

My service technically began in the fall of 2020—my second year—but the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on our program led to me beginning administrative tasks in April. I remember being happy to step up but feeling somewhat out of place as my predecessor had not yet fully transitioned out of her role. Later that year, when our writing program began revising its bylaws, I was appointed co-chair of the subcommittee. Graduate students repeatedly challenged my allegiance, asking if I advocated for certain policies because I had “sold out” to faculty administrators and forgotten my primary role of graduate student. I confronted my own uneasiness when transitioning from faculty and staff meetings to conversations with graduate students. At one point, I made the difficult decision to resign from a service position in our graduate student organization when the tension became unbearable. As months passed and contentions arose, I struggled to communicate these feelings. I couldn't talk to faculty without feeling like the traitor I was accused of being. I couldn't talk to fellow students because there were details to which they weren't always privy. Personally, I enjoyed my work and felt proud of my principled contributions. I didn't understand why my integrity was under question and the confusion of my bifurcated identity—student, administrator—diminished my confidence.

When I did confide in a faculty mentor, she explained that some GADs before me had felt similarly. I remained confused, though; I had been a student administrator before in the writing center at my previous institution, yet never experienced this kind of animosity. Now, I was conflicted by my desire to stay in the role, my commitment to my professional development, and the temptation to step down.

As I write these reflections, I see the faces of former friends and hear the words of recent disagreements. I juxtapose them with our writing program's commitment to compassionate pedagogy and wellbeing. I wonder how much of this narrative is a pity party versus a reality for other student administrators. I think about how much 2020 affected everyone's nerves and how perhaps these tensions would not have arisen in a less stressful year. I ponder how these experiences are preparing me for a future career, when I'm no longer "student," just "administrator." I confront my own values, beliefs, priorities, and identities. I hear the words of my mentor, "Not everyone's going to get you, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be you." I encourage my fellow student administrators; the job is hard, but we are not alone.